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ABSTRACT

Encouraging creativity is an important aspect of communication instruction. Qualities to be encouraged include sensitivity, flexibility, originality, imagination, perception, and the ability to analyze. A teacher can do this by creating the proper atmosphere, generating ideas, focusing on content, and applying content. Creativity can be evaluated with written or oral comments or praise, by using a dual grading system, or by some other method; however, evaluation must be seen by students as an integral part of all efforts and it must be done consistently if it is to be seen as important. (TJ)

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KINDLING THE CREATIVE SPARK

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KINDLING THE CREATIVE SPARK

When teachers discuss the grading of papers, exams, outlines, or speeches, their comments are sometimes intriguing. One teacher said, "I simply list the characteristics I want mentioned and award one point for each one that is discussed." Another said, "I use a check sheet. At the end of a speech I count up the checks and give the grade." One university uses a listening test based on the same principle. As one indicator of communication competence, students are asked to listen to and view a video-taped presentation. Following it, they respond to ten questions. How well they listened is determined by how many answers they got right out of ten. Used at a conference of basic-course directors--those who teach listening skills--it was proven that of the thirty present, most averaged only five or six right. This proves that based on this listening test, basic-course directors score little better than half right. Listening behavior is just one aspect of interpersonal communication that scholars are attempting to quantify. Academicians want criteria, competencies, characteristics, lists, outlines of essential items. There is no denying that such quantification is helpful, but it never tells the whole story. The purpose of this article is to offer the rest of the story--the creative spark that is often missing when quantification begins. As E. Paul Torrance, a writer on creativity, has indicated, "...repression of the creative impulse may lead to serious learning disabilities and heavy reliance upon authoritarian structures."[1]

It is not my intent to justify or define creativity. Most teachers know what it is (although they may deny it); some even ask for some demonstration of it. Most, however, do not know what to do with it when they get it.

To define creativity, or even to delimit its elusive parameters, is to quantify, once again, and that, in a sense, is what I am arguing against--but not entirely!

When asked the question, "Why did I choose to teach speech communication?" I often respond by saying, "It is the most creative and essential field for the existence of human beings." I have always prided myself on being in a creative field--one that has as its purpose the examination and analysis of the most creative thing we do everyday of our lives. I do not have to sit and define what I mean by that; I do not have to list a number of items and check them off to know whether another person is being creative. There is, I think, a sixth sense that operates.

My sixth sense allows me to know--if I can be objective--not only when I am being creative but also when others around me are being so. But I must be free to allow my sixth sense to operate. There is, I feel, a force afloat that tends to be inhibiting and restricting: this force emanates from those people who have to quantify everything they look at before they are able to know if and how it measures up. I am not arguing against this approach as much as I am arguing for balance. We need criteria, competencies, characteristics, and lists, but we must not allow their presence to inhibit and restrict us. As the song title asks, "Is that all there is?" --the answer is undeniably, "No." In communication, the answer is even more emphatic, "NO!" In this paper, I want to suggest ways we have to kindle the creative spark. Secondly, I want to offer several ideas for rewarding creative efforts. If we ask for it, we must do something with it--besides overlook it, give it passing notice, or damn it with faint praise.

Every student has the potential for some form of creative expression, but the growth of that potential can be increased or decreased by the way the

student is treated by teachers. The properties teachers must encourage are sensitivity, flexibility, originality, imagination, perception, and the ability to analyze.[2] Our job is to help students discover and explore their own resources. Through this exploration, they will build-up their self-confidence. Then, with greater confidence developed, the teacher offers creative exercises and activities that will encourage them to branch out and to explore their relationships with other people.[3]

One of the underlying purposes of communication classes is to help students discover aspects about themselves that will aid them in dealing with others in a worthwhile and beneficial manner. Not only must students be inspired and stimulated, they must learn to negotiate with others--an amelioration function--to understand tolerance, to grow better, as well as to move in a positive direction. This requires encouragement and development.[4] Alex Osborn, in his classic book Applied Imagination, asks, "Isn't it as important to teach students to think well as to speak well? Isn't it axiomatic that a person can talk better if he can think more creatively?"[5]

What are the means the communication teacher has to stimulate creativity in the classroom? The means to be discussed in this paper are only suggestive; they are by no means conclusive or complete. They fall into four different categories: (1) creating the proper atmosphere, (2) generating ideas, (3) focusing on content, and (4) applying content. Together, they provide an important challenge for the communication instructor. Together, too, they effectively counter what Robert Strom, in his book on Psychology for the Classroom, labels as the greatest enemy of creativity: compulsive conformity.[6]

Creativity flourishes best if a supportive atmosphere is established. As communication instructors, we have numerous ways to define and sustain

this climate. Because we are often involved in evaluating communication efforts orally, we can strive to offer positive feedback. Positive oral feedback builds self-confidence. It is supporting and reinforcing. Negative feedback can be provided in the written critiques. Because communication is a highly personal activity, we can allow the full expression of individual values. If we can not only be receptive to, but supportive of, the values expressed, this helps students see the importance of their values and the expression of those values to others. This encourages students to articulate their feelings, to support them, and to share them; in this way they begin to feel strong and confident about their own ideas.

The classroom atmosphere should also be conducive to spontaneity. Teacher and students alike must feel free to be expressive--to bring their total, authentic beings to each communication situation. To break the formality of having students get permission to speak from the teacher, of allowing comments in only a few specified categories (e.g., "Let's talk about the organization..."), or of encouraging reactions only in specified time periods (e.g., "We'll discuss these exercises in the last five minutes of the class period.") is to allow full and free expression. That time when full and free discussion occurs is, often, that time when the most creativity is exhibited and, thus, most growth.

A supportive classroom climate is fostered, too, when instead of evaluating feelings or ideas, the instructor encourages identification of those feelings and ideas through observation and subsequent reporting. Many communication teachers support the understanding, or paraphrasing, response but do little to encourage it during actual critique periods. Rather than seek to label ideas or feelings as good or bad, right or wrong, proper or improper, students can be instructed to determine exactly where another student

stands by paraphrasing and rephrasing. Not only is this good practice, it is supportive and reinforcing. It tends to draw out the student holding the initial ideas; in this way, discussion of ideas and values occurs.

Finally, a proper atmosphere for encouraging creativity is one that reinforces effective listening. Not only can the components of strong listening be identified and discussed, but those who manifest these characteristics can be praised as well. Listening is often reflected by an active, alert, responsive class climate where students are involved and reacting. Individual actions are affected by the whole situation in which the students are involved, in which they share ideas, and of which they are cooperative or interacting parts.[7] This cannot occur in a dull, lifeless, boring climate. The communication classroom should be one of energy, dynamism, activity, enthusiasm, and interest.

The second major area where instructors can encourage creativity is in the area of generating ideas. Many communication exercises and activities require the discovery of an idea or ideas on which students will then focus. Small-group and public-speaking assignments are good examples. Too often we stifle creativity by suggesting ideas, by giving too much direction, or by reinforcing the trivial, mundane, or hackneyed idea. We are comfortable with the tried and tested--unwilling to let students explore the new and unusual.

One activity that has proven valuable, has generated a large quantity of ideas, and has been fun is "stream-of-consciousness" (or brainstorming) on a whole-class, or small-group level. The instructor serves as the recorder and simply lets the class generate ideas. Whatever is said is recorded. I have labeled this "stream-of-consciousness" rather than "brainstorming," because the latter makes the activity more of a cognitive experience whereas

stream-of-consciousness encourages both the cognitive and affective. A wider range of ideas is generated. No evaluation is allowed until the generation-stage is completed.

Similarly, in a class that is not very quick, reactive, or spontaneous, the teacher can goad and challenge the students. His or her enthusiasm can often be reflected in the level of class involvement and participation. Running "whips" that focus on a particular topic, issue, or area also helps. This is best done when students are seated in a circle and the instructor--or facilitator--whips from one student to the next, generating ideas or asking for comments without pausing between them.

Creativity is easier to encourage when the creative juices seem to be flowing. But what does the instructor do when ideas are not flowing? Sidney J. Parnes, a writer on and teacher of creativity, suggests using checklists, forced relationships, attribute listing, or the morphological approach. After generating the ideas, he suggests that it is important to use judgment in separating the wheat from the chaff. As he states in the conclusion of his article on "Idea-Stimulation Techniques," teachers are often in need of ways to speed up the hunch mechanism.[8]

Allowing class time for intense concentration can also help encourage quality ideas. Too often we are too intent on staying with the syllabus, completing all the required activities, covering the "proper" amount of information, or sticking to a pre-planned exercise. Sometimes, all students need is time to think in a more narrow, focused, or intense direction. They need time. Relaxation--a time for an easy, comfortable, satisfying approach--may gain the same results (or better ones). To try to eliminate, to a certain degree, the pressure, push, drive, or deadline, can be helpful, enjoyable, and rewarding.

Creativity can be encouraged, too, when the instructor focuses on the content or substance of student presentations. The overriding theme for the teacher--or guideline--should be to "allow students the freedom to be, to become their best selves."[9] The instructor can do this, in part, by being creative--providing a model. He or she can help students, too, to realize the power of their own imagination: that all students have an unlimited source of creativity upon which they can draw. In addition, students must become aware of the power of the language they have at their disposal.

Improvization, creative dramatics, and exercises and activities that call for emotional or sensory recall help students focus on their creative potential. Wonder, discovery, and concern are important. They are fostered and nurtured when students experience closeness--a peaceful community. When students are in communion with the other members of the class they become involved. It is from such involvement that ingenuity and imagination are kindled and that mutual sharing opens them up and draws them in.

When instructors focus on content and substance, it must be done from a position of love and respect. Words and ideas are the creative product of fertile minds. "To learn is to love."[10] From this understanding, a relaxed acceptance of failure is developed. No longer is failure self-destructive. It is accepted within the whole context where individuals discuss values, identify feelings, and provide supportive feedback. A person does not fail as much as he or she learns to grow in new ways and in new directions.

Finally, teachers can encourage creativity in the communication classroom when applying content. Too often, communication skills are developed for the purposes of passing a course, doing well on an exam, or pleasing an instructor. If transfer to the real world or to other situations and classes occurs, it is

accidental--a serendipitous result. The creative person, however, "is the individual who uses his imagination to find effective solutions to his day-to-day problems."[11] The teacher who fosters creativity in the classroom transfers concepts, principles, and ideas to the students' current and potential future frame of reference. He or she shows students how communication provides solutions to a variety of day-to-day problems. Because of the broad, transdisciplinary, and practical nature of communication, this transfer is not only easy, it is necessary. Often, role-playing situations or case studies facilitate this transfer. Simulations and field study also can help.

If the instructor has encouraged creativity by creating the proper atmosphere, in generating ideas, by focusing on content, and by applying that content, the next problem is what to do with the results. Some teachers avoid the issue of evaluating creativity by not encouraging it at all. Others encourage it and do not evaluate or grade it. This latter approach may be useful for some activities, but it depends on the nature of the activity. When an activity must be graded, however, how is creativity judged?

There are several methods that can be used to evaluate creativity. Written and oral comments of praise can be offered. Creativity can be entered as a criterion on evaluation forms; it could also be entered on assignment-instruction sheets. It could be featured in special ways by adding a short additional written comment on a colored three-by-five card. Getting a colored card could then become a goal. But the evaluation of creativity must be a consistent factor--not one that is entered or pursued at one point and not at another. That is why a proper atmosphere is so important. Encouragement of creativity is an ongoing, omnipresent process. It must be viewed by students as an integral part of all efforts, not something tacked on as an addenda or appendix.

One way of grading creativity might be to use a dual grading system where one grade is for the method or technique--the ability to follow the assignment--and another is for the creativity or imagination of the effort. Here, then, novelty, uniqueness, originality, and imagination are rewarded. When students see that creativity has its own reward, because of prior conditioning (grade consciousness), they are more willing to push themselves in that direction. Since it is usually not encouraged and goes unrewarded--or it is encouraged and then not rewarded--students are not moved to respond. Their only response might be, "Why bother?"

To encourage creativity is to support a skill most likely to have lifelong implications--a generic skill. It allows students freedom to be, freedom to grow, and freedom to perceive. These freedoms help them avoid boredom, overcome their disabilities, and even laugh at life. These freedoms, too, breed self-confidence, greater security, and satisfying personal relationships. They also help students become happier people.[12] It is this permission to be <u>free</u>, according to Carl Rogers, "which also means that /they are/ responsible."[13]

In this article, the nature of creativity has been discussed, ways the communication instructor has for encouraging it have been presented, and several ways of evaluating it have been offered. The argument is for a freer, more flexible, or spontaneous approach. The value of listing criteria, competencies, characteristics, and essential items has not been denied, but without creativity as an ingredient--an essential item--lists tend to become what E. Paul Torrance has identified as an authoritarian structure. It rigidifies our approach causing inflexibility, stiffness, and an unyielding methodology. It may also result in precision and accuracy; creativity is imprecise and seldom conforms to a predetermined standard.

As communication instructors, we must depend more on our sixth sense than we do. The force afloat that inhibits our ability in this regard is the need to quantify everything--to know exactly how things measure up. When that need is excessive, the creative spark is extinguished. There becomes no joy or no reward for looking at the world differently, for thinking new thoughts, or for being imaginative. Thus, the bulk of this article has been concerned with ways we have--as concerned communication teachers--to kindle the creative spark.

Footnotes

[1] As quoted in Charles R. Duke, Creative Dramatics and English Teaching (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1974), p. 6.

[2] Duke, Creative Dramatics, pp. 6-7.

[3] Brian Way, Development Through Drama (New York: Humanities Press, 1967), p. 13.

[4] E. Paul Torrance, Creativity: Its Educational Implications, ed. John Curtis Gowan et al. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1967), p. 6.

[5] Alex F. Osborn, Applied Imagination: Principles and Procedures of Creative Thinking (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), as cited in Sidney Parnes, "Can Creativity Be Increased?" A Source Book for Creative Thinking, Sidney Parnes and Harold Harding, eds. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), p. 185-191.

[6] Robert D. Strom, Psychology for the Classroom (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), p. 228.

[7] John Dewey, "Learning as Socializing," in Donald Vandenberg, ed., Teaching and Learning (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1969), p. 219.

[8] Sidney J. Parnes, "Idea-Stimulation Techniques," Journal of Creative Behavior, 10 (Second Quarter 1976), 126-129.

[9] Harriet B. Morrison, "The Creative Classroom," Journal of Creative Behavior, 7 (Third Quarter 1973), 198.

[10] Kenneth E. Eble, A Perfect Education (New York: Collier Books, 1968), p. 1.

[11] Gordon A. MacLeod, "Does Creativity Lead to Happiness and More Enjoyment of Life?" Journal of Creative Behavior, 7 (Fourth Quarter 1973), 230.

[12] MacLeod, "Does Creativity Lead...?" 230.

[13] Carl R. Rogers, "Toward a Theory of Creativity," in Phillip Ewart Vernon, ed., Creativity (Suffolk, England: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 139.